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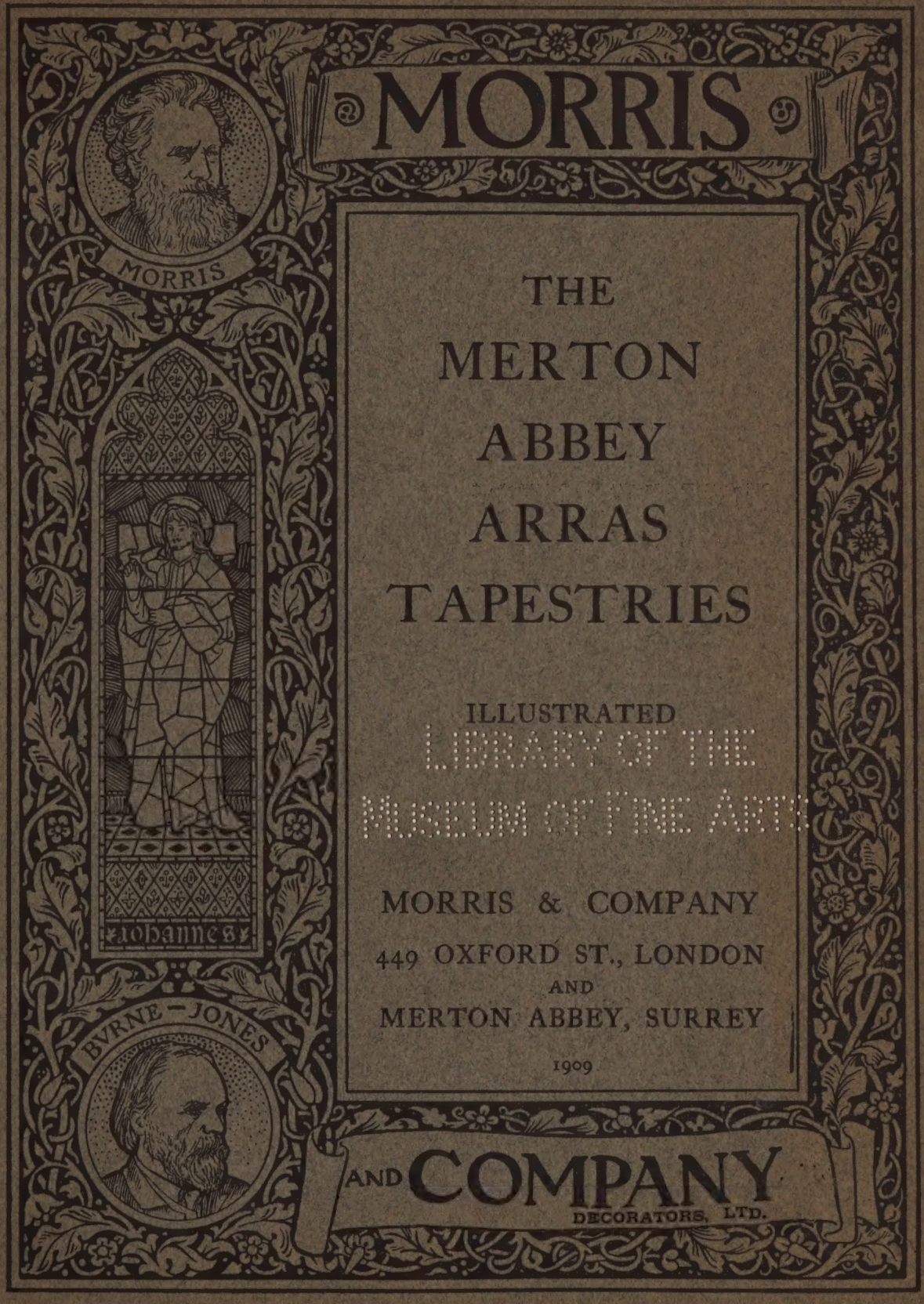
SOME EXAMPLES OF MERTON ABBEY TAPESTRIES

by

Aymer Vallance

PRICE SIXPENCE



THE MERTON ABBEY ARRAS TAPESTRIES

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MORRIS & COMPANY
449 OXFORD ST., LONDON
AND
MERTON ABBEY, SURREY
1909

LIBRARY OF THE
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DETAIL OF SIR E. BURNE-JONES'S "ADORATION" TAPESTRY.

"THE ADORATION" ARRAS TAPESTRY. 13 FT. LONG BY 8 FT. 8 IN. DESIGNED BY SIR EDWARD BURNE-JONES, AND WOVEN ON THE MORRIS LOOMS AT MERTON ABBEY, SURREY.
THE ORIGINAL PIECE WAS MADE FOR EXETER COLLEGE, OXFORD; REPLICAS FOR ETON COLLEGE, HAMBURG MUSEUM, MANCHESTER ART SCHOOLS, CARROW ABBEY, AND ELSEWHERE.

SOME EXAMPLES OF MERTON ABBEY TAPESTRIES.

BY AYMER VALLANCE.

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THERE exists a document which would seem hitherto to have eluded the vigilance of the late William Morris's bibliographers, and that is a letter over his signature, published in the sixteenth volume of "The Journal of the Derbyshire Archæological Society." Dated 5th April, 1893, it is valuable as giving a brief epitome of the tapestry work executed by Morris's firm up to that period. "It may interest you to know," the letter begins, "that I wove a piece of ornament with my own hands, the chief merit of which, I take it, lies in the fact that I learned the art of doing it, with no other help than what I could get from a very little

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THE ROUND TABLE AND THE MAIDEN OF THE QUEST. FROM THE "HOLY GRAIL" SERIES, DESIGNED BY SIR E. BURNE-JONES.

The "Holy Grail" Tapestries were first designed and made for Stanmore Hall in 1894-5; and were shown successively at the Arts and Crafts Exhibitions. Replicas of the entire set were made for the late Mr. George McCulloch in 1898-9, and of three pieces only for Mr. Laurence Hodson in 1895-6. These latter are now in the Corporation Art Gallery at Birmingham. The subjects will not be repeated.

The McCulloch tapestries were lent by special request for the decoration of the British Pavilion (Government Exhibit) at the Paris International Exhibition of 1900, and were awarded the Grand Prix.

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eighteenth-century book, one of the series of '*Arts & Metiers*,' published by the Government." This, his first piece of arras, Morris calls in his diary the "Cabbage and Vine Tapestry." It was begun, as recorded in the same diary, on May 10th, 1879. It contained foliage and birds, but no figures; in short it was a *verdura*. But nothing less than figure-work could content him; and after fifteen years of untiring effort the firm were engaged, under Morris's direction, on the now world-famed "Holy Grail" series for Mr. D'Arcy, at Stanmore. To have made thus a dead art live again was a gigantic achievement for one man to accomplish; and no other was capable of doing it but William Morris.

The earliest specimen of figure-work woven at Merton was Mr. Walter Crane's "Goose Girl." The original cartoon, now at the Victoria and Albert Museum, bears the date 1880. The tapestry itself was executed

in the following year. From that time forward, however (with one exception, presently to be noted), Morris always secured Sir Edward Burne-Jones to design the figures, the accessories being arranged at first by Morris himself, subsequently by his gifted pupil, Mr. J. H. Dearle.

The exception referred to was a tapestry from Morris's own design. It is sometimes spoken of as *The Seasons*, though Morris himself named it *The Orchard*. It comprises four figures holding between them an outstretched scroll, with Morris's verses, "'*Midst bitten mead . . . spring to be*," inscribed upon it. The hieratic character of the figures, robed in albs, stoles and copes, shows them to have been intended, in the first instance, for a definitely ecclesiastical purpose. They were, in fact, designed for, and carried out as, a painted frieze in the nave of Jesus College Chapel, Cambridge. The figures had to be enlarged somewhat to adapt them to the scale of the tapestry, but otherwise are identical in outline with the

DEPARTURE OF THE KNIGHTS. FROM THE "HOLY GRAIL" SERIES, DESIGNED BY SIR E. BURNE-JONES.

THE FAILURE OF SIR LANCELOT. FROM THE "HOLY GRAIL" SERIES, DESIGNED BY SIR E. BURNE-JONES.

earlier work. The *Orchard* tapestry, finished in time to be shown at the exhibition of the Arts and Crafts Society at the end of 1893, was subsequently acquired, with another entitled *Angeli laudantes*, in 1898, for the Victoria and Albert Museum. The last-named is an adaptation of the cartoon for a painted window, designed in 1878, for the south quire aisle in Salisbury Cathedral. Another cartoon, of *David giving directions to Solomon for the building of the Temple*, designed originally for a window in Trinity Church, Boston, U.S.A., was recently executed in tapestry, with remarkably successful effect, for an Australian order.

The *Flora* panel, here reproduced in colour, was originally executed in 1885, with a white-robed figure amid a greenery of acanthus foliage, designed by William Morris. For the present scheme of colouring and background of flowering plants Mr. Dearle is responsible.

Reference has already been made to the *Angeli laudantes*. This and

THE FAILURE OF SIR GAWAIN. FROM THE "HOLY GRAIL" SERIES, DESIGNED BY SIR E. BURNE-JONES.

the companion subject, *Angeli ministrantes* (both subjects with the addition of a dado of trees and armorial shields, adapted from a portion of the "Holy Grail" decoration), were executed in 1904 for Eton College Chapel, to flank the "Star of Bethlehem" tapestry already there. The whole arrangement was designed as a memorial to those Etonians who fell in the South African war, as witness the Latin inscription running along the top of one of the panels :—"*Has e Mertonensi textrina imagines militum suorum memores posuerunt Etonenses MDCCCCIII.*"

More important, however, than any single one of its predecessors is the grand tapestry hanging, *The Passing of Venus*. The *motif* for this was not a new one of the artist's. As long ago as 1878, in *Laus Veneris* (a painting begun, indeed, seventeen years earlier still), in the background on the right is depicted a wall decoration, presumably arras, with this very subject of the goddess seated on a car drawn by flying doves. In the original version the Cupid discharging his arrows is a child standing on the

THE ACHIEVEMENT OF SIR GALAHAD, SIR PERCEVAL, AND SIR BORS. FROM THE "HOLY GRAIL" SERIES, DESIGNED BY SIR E. BURNE-JONES.

front of the car itself; whereas, in the maturer version, a full-grown Cupid, ruddy-winged, is superbly conspicuous in the centre of the composition (*see page* 17). For the treatment of this figure fairly complete details were forthcoming at Sir Edward Burne-Jones's death. But for the rest, that ever-to-be-regretted fatality had prevented him supplying much more than the roughest of water-colour sketches to indicate the general grouping.

The scale and dignity of the composition itself did not admit of anything whatever being left to take its chance in the course of translation into woven arras; not a single detail in it but had to become the subject of most diligent care and arrangement. And although it is not pretended that the work was carried on without intermission during the whole period, it was fully six years in the loom before being finally completed, and before it was ready for exhibition at the New Gallery in the current year, 1908. Who of all that witnessed the first germ of the idea in the *Laus Veneris* of twenty years previously could possibly have foreseen such magnificent fruition? It is no exaggeration to say that this one surpasses even the finest of all Messrs. Morris & Company's past achievements in tapestry.

Now it may, not unreasonably, be inquired whether any changes or improvements have been introduced into Merton tapestry weaving during the twelve years elapsed since Morris's death? The answer is that, in respect of material and mode of working, there has been not only no falling away, but no departure from the founder's tradition. The wools are still dyed on the spot and with the same ingredients that Morris used, with, if anything, a slightly more extended range of colour. But as for

the executants—most of them old hands, two or three of them actually those who worked with Morris from the outset—they have attained to a degree of technical proficiency and sureness in manipulation that comes only of long years of practice. Many are the stumbling-blocks that once would have been hardly circumvented, but can now be met squarely and as triumphantly surmounted. This remark applies particularly to the rendering of human features; and again, to take the matter of colour, already mentioned, a certain light tone of mauve, admittedly most difficult to deal with satisfactorily, and on that account never employed in Morris's time, has been introduced boldly and (so far as can be judged in the yet unfinished state of the work) with complete success in a new panel, now in the act of being woven. It represents "The Blind-folding of Truth," from a cartoon by Mr. Byam Shaw (*since finished*, *see page* 20).

A tapestry from the cartoon of another well-known designer, Mr. Heywood Sumner, has recently been executed. Its subject, *The Chace*, is treated in a totally distinct manner from that of Burne-Jones. The border, broken into separate panels, with woodland birds and animals, is not the least delightful part of the composition (*see page* 19).

In one important regard a system has been adopted which claims to be a definite advance on previous methods, from those of the earliest tapestries, down to and including those executed at Merton in Morris's own lifetime. The point is a technical one, arising out of the nature of the process. It should be explained that the almost invariable custom has been, and still is, to build up the pattern in the high loom at right-angles to the direction in which the work is eventually to be hung. In other words the warp threads, vertical during execution, run in the finished work from side to side. The result is, that while the vertical junctions, crossing the warp and being held in position by the latter, remain steadfast and secure, the horizontal joints, wherever there is a sharp transition from one colour to another, have a natural

THE SHIP. FROM THE "HOLY GRAIL" SERIES.

tendency to strain open with the weight of the web. To obviate this inherent weakness the ancient system was, after the weaving, to run the two raw edges together with needle and thread. The latter availed to make the web cohere well enough when new, but in process of time was apt to perish and leave the tapestry a mass of disintegration. In small panels the strain is not serious enough to signify, but in all large pieces its gravity is in direct ratio to the size of the web. Under Morris the traditional plan was always followed, but the firm have since adopted the modern French method, whereby the horizontal joints are all secured in the loom by intertwisting the warp wools with one another at the back. Thus resort to thread is dispensed with, and, while there is no ridge nor any token of knotting to be seen on the face, the weakest points of the web are all so firmly welded together that it becomes a compact whole, better calculated, *ceteris paribus*, to last than any specimens whose joints are sewn together in the old-fashioned way.

In conclusion, if it be a permissible indiscretion to refer to matters already relegated to the obscurity of a Parliamentary Blue Book, it may be news to many to learn that, a select committee having been appointed to inquire and report with respect to the unfinished condition of the rooms and approaches in the Palace of Westminster, at the close of the year 1906, the question of tapestry decorations was discussed and their employment advocated by a number of competent witnesses, *e.g.*, Sir Edward Poynter, P.R.A., Sir W. B. Richmond, R.A., Mr. T. G. Jackson, R.A., Mr. Solomon Solomon, R.A., Professor Lethaby, Mr. John D. Batten and Mr. Sydney Cockerell. The majority of these gentlemen advised in particular the employment of Morris tapestry, speaking of it in terms of unstinted praise.

What may be the upshot of it all it is premature at present to speculate. For my own part, not having been called upon to appear before the select committee, I should like to take the opportunity in these pages to declare that I cordially agree with the testimony of the experts above-mentioned, and that I should welcome its practical adoption by the authorities, if it might be, with feelings of profound pleasure and thankfulness.

AYMER VALLANCE.

THE MERTON ABBEY TAPESTRIES.

THE ORCHARD. SIZE 16 FT. LONG × 7 FT. HIGH. DESIGNED BY WILLIAM MORRIS. WOVEN 1892-3, AND PURCHASED BY THE VICTORIA AND ALBERT MUSEUM, SOUTH KENSINGTON.

WILLIAM MORRIS AND THE REVIVAL OF ARRAS TAPESTRY.

"The manufacture of Arras Tapestry, on which Morris had been experimenting throughout the year (1881) was only fairly begun after the works were removed to Merton. The first piece made there was a frieze of greenery with birds, which, like the carpet of the previous year, went to Naworth. In reviving this noble art he had nothing in England to guide him beyond drawings of looms in old books. To see what the mechanism was like he had to pay a visit to the Gobelins, where he found the ancient loom still in use, though sunk to the servile task of making copies of oil paintings. The low-warp loom, which had replaced it elsewhere, he at once dismissed as useless for his purpose. In it the task of the weaver is confined to copying the imperfectly seen cartoon stretched under the warp, at which he peers between the threads. The work is almost purely mechanical; the face of the tapestry being below, and the weaving done from the back. The weaving done on the high-warp loom approximates in method to the painting of a picture; the artificer produces his form and colour, stitch by stitch, by the exercise of his own intelligence, and sees, in his little swinging mirror, the actual surface forming itself insensibly under his hand, as if it were a picture on the easel."

From "The Life of William Morris," by J. W. Mackail.

THE GOOSE GIRL. SIZE 7 FT. 10 IN. × 6 FT. DESIGN BY MR. WALTER CRANE. THIS WAS THE FIRST FIGURE TAPESTRY WOVEN (1881-2) ON THE MERTON ABBEY LOOMS. IT WAS SOLD TO A CLIENT IN AMERICA, AND HAS NOT YET BEEN REPEATED.

PEACE. ARRAS TAPESTRY 7 FT. 8 IN. × 5 FT. 8 IN. FIGURE DESIGNED BY SIR E. BURNE-JONES. THE BACKGROUND AND BORDER BY H. DEARLE. WOVEN 1889.

POMONA. FIGURE DESIGNED BY SIR E. BURNE-JONES; BACKGROUND AND BORDER BY H. DEARLE. SIZE 5 FT. 6 IN. HIGH BY 3 FT. 3 IN. WIDE. ALSO WOVEN ON A LARGE SCROLL BACKGROUND WITH INSCRIPTION BY WILLIAM MORRIS. SIZE 10 FT. BY 7 FT. 5 IN.

THE MERTON ABBEY TAPESTRIES.

FLORA. FIGURE DESIGNED BY SIR E. BURNE-JONES; BACKGROUND AND BORDER BY H. DEARLE. SIZE 5 FT. 6IN. HIGH BY 3 FT. 3 IN. WIDE. ALSO WOVEN ON A LARGE SCROLL BACKGROUND WITH INSCRIPTION BY WILLIAM MORRIS; SIZE 10 FT. BY 7 FT. 5 IN.

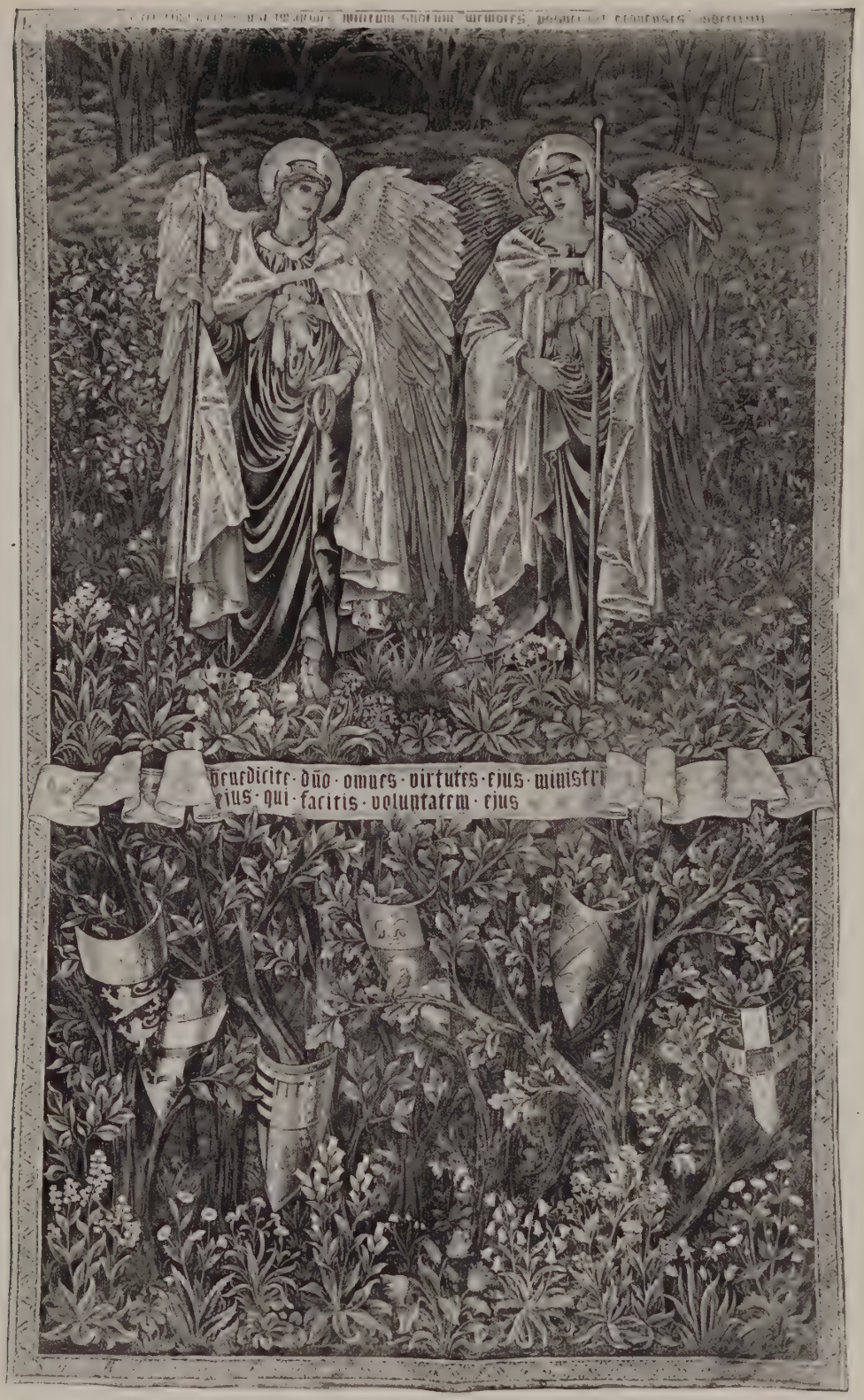
THE WOODPECKER. VERDURE TAPESTRY 9 FT. 7 IN. HIGH × 5 FT. WIDE. DESIGNED BY WILLIAM MORRIS. WOVEN 1885.

THE MERTON ABBEY TAPESTRIES.

"ANGELI LAUDANTES." 14 FT. 7 IN. × 9 FT. FIGURES FROM THE DESIGNS OF SIR E. BURNE-JONES FOR A MORRIS WINDOW IN SALISBURY CATHEDRAL; BACKGROUND BY H. DEARLE. TAPESTRY DESIGNED AND WOVEN IN 1904-5 FOR THE EAST END OF ETON COLLEGE CHAPEL, AS PART OF THE WAR MEMORIAL.

TAPESTRIES HAVE ALSO BEEN WOVEN FROM THESE AND THE COMPANION FIGURES, WITHOUT THE FOLIAGE, SINGLY AND IN PAIRS. *(See p. 21.)*

THE MERTON ABBEY TAPESTRIES.



"ANGELI MINISTRANTES," 14 FT. 7 IN. × 9 FT. FIGURES FROM THE DESIGNS OF SIR E. BURNE-JONES FOR A MORRIS WINDOW IN SALISBURY CATHEDRAL; BACKGROUND BY H. DEARLE. TAPESTRY DESIGNED AND WOVEN IN 1904-5 FOR THE EAST END OF ETON COLLEGE CHAPEL, AS PART OF THE WAR MEMORIAL.

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THE MERTON ABBEY TAPESTRIES.

ARRAS TAPESTRY AFTER THE "PRIMAVERA" OF BOTTICELLI. SIZE 12 FT. 8 IN. × 8 FT. 6 IN. WOVEN IN 1895 FOR MR. WILFRED BLUNT. ALSO IN 1896 FOR MR. HENRY ARTHUR JONES. EXHIBITED FRANCO-BRITISH EXHIBITION, 1908, AND AWARDED GRAND PRIZE FOR TAPESTRY.

THE MERTON ABBEY TAPESTRIES.

DAVID INSTRUCTING SOLOMON IN THE BUILDING OF THE TEMPLE. DESIGN BY SIR EDWARD BURNE-JONES. SIZE 9 FT. 8 IN. × 9 FT. 9 IN. WOVEN IN 1902-3, AND NOW IN POSSESSION OF THE HON. GEORGE BROOKMAN, ADELAIDE. FROM A WATER-COLOUR SKETCH.

THE MERTON ABBEY TAPESTRIES.

THE PASSING OF VENUS. SIZE 20 FT. LONG × 9 FT. HIGH. THE FIGURES WERE THE LAST WORK DESIGNED BY SIR EDWARD BURNE-JONES; THE BACKGROUND, COLOURING, AND ACCESSORIES BEING BY H. DEARLE. WOVEN AT MERTON ABBEY, 1901-1907. EXHIBITED NEW GALLERY, SUMMER 1908; AND MANCHESTER CORPORATION ART SCHOOLS, WINTER 1908.

Comment des jeunes colombeaux
En ung char qui fut riche et beaux
Mainent Venus en lost d'Amours
Pour lui faire hatif secours.

Roman de la Rose.

THE MERTON ABBEY TAPESTRIES.

EXTRACT FROM "A HISTORY OF TAPESTRY," BY W. G. THOMSON. 1906.

"No praise can be too high in describing the Merton Abbey Tapestries; one can only say that they fulfil the description of the art as it should be, in the words of Morris. "It may be looked upon," he says, as a mosaic of pieces of colour made up of dyed threads, and is capable of producing wall ornament of any degree of elaboration within the proper limits of duly considered decorative work. As in all wall decoration, the first thing to be considered in the designing of tapestry is the force, purity, and elegance of the silhouette of the objects represented, and nothing vague or indeterminate is admissible. Depth of tone, richness of colour, and exquisite gradation of tints are easily to be obtained in tapestry; and it also demands that crispness and abundance of beautiful detail which was the especial characteristic of fully developed Mediæval Art." (William Morris's Arts and Crafts Essay on "Textiles.")

THE FOREST. VERDURE DESIGN BY WILLIAM MORRIS, WITH ANIMAL FIGURES BY PHILIP WEBB. WOVEN 1887, FOR A. IONIDES, ESQ.

THE CHACE. SIZE 13 FT. × 7 FT. 7 IN. DESIGNED FOR MORRIS AND COMPANY BY MR. HEYWOOD SUMNER, AND WOVEN 1908.

THE BLIND-FOLDING OF TRUTH—AN ALLEGORY. SIZE 9 FT. WIDE × 8 FT. HIGH. DESIGNED FOR MORRIS AND COMPANY BY MR. BYAM SHAW. WOVEN 1908-9.

In the Allegory, Truth is represented as a beautiful maid, stripped, despoiled and blindfolded by the great ones of the Earth ; her garments rent and stained ; her limbs bound and fettered. Court ladies screen her indignities and look down upon her; Court retainers wink and whisper about her, and the Court soldiery support them, keeping back the crowds that would throng to her aid. An Archbishop in full canonicals turns a hypocrite's eyes to heaven as the wrong is done, and other clerics look on sourly from their breviaries. Of all the motley throng which surrounds her, only two figures are in sympathy and strive to keep alight the flickering flame of her lamp—an aged fool and a little boy. The bird of wisdom perches upon the fool's shoulder, and is attached to him alone by a cord of ownership.

THE MERTON ABBEY TAPESTRIES.

ADORATION ALTAR-PIECE. DESIGNED BY H. DEARLE. SIZE 7 FT. 4 IN. WIDE × 4 FT. 5 IN. HIGH.
WALL HANGINGS HAVE ALSO BEEN DESIGNED TO GO WITH THIS ALTAR-PIECE, BUT HAVE NOT BEEN WOVEN.

ONE OF THE PAIR OF PRAISING ANGELS, FROM THE CARTOONS BY SIR E. BURNE-JONES. MEMORIAL TAPESTRIES, WOVEN 1902.

MERTON TAPESTRIES IN PROGRESS.

THE ANNUNCIATION, BY FRA LIPPO LIPPI. FROM THE NATIONAL GALLERY PICTURE.
SIZE 7 FT. 8 IN. WIDE × 3 FT. HIGH. SUITABLE FOR AN ALTAR-PIECE.

LOVE AND THE PILGRIM. ONE OF A SERIES OF DESIGNS BY SIR E. BURNE-JONES, ILLUSTRATING THE ROMAN DE LA ROSE. SIZE 9 FT. WIDE × 5 FT. HIGH.

ANOTHER, "THE PILGRIM IN THE GARDEN," WAS WOVEN IN 1901.

THE MERTON ABBEY TAPESTRIES.

In addition to the Tapestries illustrated or mentioned in previous pages, the following have been, or are being made, and can be repeated. Suitable designs by other artists can be woven to order.

Figures of Saints George, Agnes, and Cecilia, by Sir E. Burne-Jones. Small panels 5 ft. 3 in. high, by 1 ft. 9 in. wide.

Minstrel Figures, designed by William Morris, about 2 ft. 6 in. high by 2 ft. wide.

Various Verdure subjects, with Deer, etc.

Agnus Dei. Small design for a Church Banner.

In preparation.

Floral coverings for Settee and Chairs. Designed by H. Dearle.

"The Orange Tree." Large Portière, designed by H. Dearle.

RESTORATION OF OLD TAPESTRIES.

MORRIS & COMPANY have made some very successful restorations of ancient tapestry, with and without gold or silver thread. In general this work is either sent out of the country to be re-loomed, or else is darned improperly with the needle.

MORRIS & COMPANY also undertake the Cleaning and Re-lining of old Tapestries.

ARRAS TAPESTRY WORKERS, MERTON ABBEY.

"VINE AND ACANTHUS" DESIGN FOR WALL-PANEL (HALF ONLY).

This Panel, which has frequently been worked in embroidery, was the one originally designed by William Morris for the purpose of studying the weaving of Arras Tapestry, and is referred to at the beginning of Mr. Vallance's article. The Tapestry made by him is in existence, and was exhibited in 1907 at Clifford's Inn.

MORRIS & COMPANY have a special department of Embroidery Work, and possess a great number of designs by Mr. Morris and others. Their embroidery silks and wools are of the best quality, dyed with pure dyes at Merton Abbey, and only to be obtained direct from the Firm. An illustrated list of suggestions for started work will be sent on application.

THE VYNER MEMORIAL WINDOW AT CHRIST CHURCH CATHEDRAL.
DESIGNED BY SIR E. BURNE-JONES.

THE EAST WINDOW OF MANCHESTER COLLEGE CHAPEL, OXFORD.
DESIGNED BY SIR E. BURNE-JONES.

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